



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

L'Argent by Robert Bresson

William Johnson

Film Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 4. (Summer, 1984), pp. 18-21.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28198422%2937%3A4%3C18%3AAL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

to disappear.”¹⁰ In this odd encounter between these two archaeologists of history’s edges, Schroeter then responds, somewhat later, quoting part of the concluding paragraph of Foucault’s *Order of Things* as an unwitting summary of the historical moment that his films continually perform, a moment when the composed face of the subject balances fragily on the edge of the sea that surrounds history, an instant of history when “one can certainly wager than man would be erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”¹¹

NOTES

1. *Frankfurter Rundschau* (24 February 1979). The other important commentary on Schroeter is Werner Schroeter (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1980). In English, Gary Indiana’s “Scattered Pictures,” *Artforum* (March 1982) is a recent introduction to Schroeter.
2. Serge Daney, “Schroeter et Naples,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 307 (January 1980), 29.

3. Daney, p. 28.
4. See Thomas Elsaesser’s “The Postwar German Cinema,” in *Fassbinder* (London: BFI, 1976), pp. 1–17; Timothy Corrigan, *New German Film: The Displaced Image* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); and Eric Rentschler’s “American Friends and the New German Cinema,” *New German Critique*, 24–25 (Fall–Winter 1981–82).
5. This is of course William Empson’s phrase which Susan Sontag retrieved in her famous “Notes on ‘Camp’” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1961). Of the many pertinent remarks in this essay, the following seems particularly appropriate: “The canon of Camp can change . . . Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies, the fantastic nature of which we don’t perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own” (p. 286).
6. This particular sentence and some other theoretical notions in my essay are mapped in Stephen Heath’s *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).
7. See “Werner Schroeter’s Operatic Cinema,” *Discourse*, 3 (Summer 1981), 52.
8. Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XI* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 60.
9. Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, p. 124.
10. In Gerard Courant, *Werner Schroeter* (Paris: Goethe Institut), p. 45 and p. 39.
11. *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 387.

Reviews

L’ARGENT

(Money). Script and direction: Robert Bresson, from a story by Lev Tolstoy. Photography: Pasqualino de Santis, Emmanuel Machuel. Editing: Jean-François Naudon. France/Switzerland 1983. Cinécom International.

There are two levels of satisfaction in watching *L’Argent*. The first is to see Bresson, in his mid-70’s, back at the peak of his form after the meandering ventures of *Lancelot du Lac* and *The Devil Probably*. The second is to discover that he has achieved this not by lowering his sights but by raising them, so that *L’Argent* involves risks he has never taken before.

The hallmarks of Bresson’s style are unmistakable. The cast consists of unknowns who remain virtually deadpan, barred from any self-conscious acting. There is a severe economy in the images, which are tightly composed with the elements of interest nearly always in the foreground, and also in their editing, which favors rapid, elliptic leaps. Great attention is paid to the sound track, which often relates to sources outside the image; speech is sometimes copious but never

explains or appeals to the emotions; there is no incidental music. The protagonist is young: in nearly all of his films, Bresson’s special concern is with people who are just becoming aware of their capabilities and limitations. *L’Argent* also touches on two of his favorite themes: imprisonment, as in *A Man Escaped*, *Joan of Arc* and *Pickpocket* (to which may be added *Les Anges du péché*, with its convent walls), and suicide, as in *The Diary of a Country Priest*, *Mouchette*, *Une Femme Douce* and *The Devil Probably*.

Bresson’s earlier films, however, convey a more general sense of confinement. Both mentally and physically, his characters keep going over the same ground—the repeated meetings on the bridge in *Four Nights of a Dreamer*, or the obsessive memory of the wife’s suicide in *Femme Douce*. Even the most open of his other films—*Balthazar*, with its complex interplay of leading characters—forms a closed circle, as it begins with the birth and ends with the death of the eponymous donkey. *L’Argent*, by contrast, is centrifugal: from its matter-of-fact beginning it moves outward by progressively larger leaps.

This structure derives only in part from the posthumous Tolstoy novella on which the film is based, *The Forged Note*. There, a single dishonest act touches off a chain reaction of evil that affects dozens of people; then, as one character is converted, a reverse chain reaction brings goodness back to the original offender. Bresson omits virtually all of the second chain and concentrates most of the spreading evil within one character.

The opening scenes (which follow Tolstoy closely) present almost a Marxist fable. Two well-to-do youths pass off a counterfeit bill at a photo store. The store owner and his assistant Lucien pass off this and other counterfeit bills to Yvon, an oil deliveryman. When Yvon innocently tries to pay with the bills at a cafe, the proprietor calls the police. At the photo store, Lucien denies ever having seen Yvon. When Yvon takes the matter to court, Lucien repeats his denial under oath (for which the store owner rewards him) and the suit is dismissed. Because Yvon is behaving like a troublemaker and his honesty appears questionable, he is fired. He gets a "job" as the driver of a getaway car for a bank robbery, but is caught and sentenced to three years in jail. Meanwhile, another sales clerk at the photo store has recognized the boys who passed the counterfeit bill and reports them to their school. The mother of one boy bribes the sales clerk to withdraw her accusation.

At this point the action moves onto less familiar ground. Lucien, who has been siphoning off some of the photo store's receipts, is fired and becomes a full-time thief. We hear of him as a kind of Robin Hood who has been sending some of his loot to the needy. (This is the only element that Bresson retains from Tolstoy's chain reaction of goodness.) Then Lucien is caught and sent to the same prison as Yvon. He wishes to atone for his perjury by helping Yvon escape, but Yvon rejects him out of hand, determined to exact revenge. Lucien makes an unsuccessful attempt to escape on his own.

Meanwhile, Yvon's small daughter falls sick and dies, and his wife Elise writes that she is leaving him. Yvon attempts suicide but is saved in the prison hospital. After he is released, he goes to a small hotel, kills the couple who own it, and makes off with



Robert Bresson's L'ARGENT

money from the till. He next appears in a country town where he follows an elderly woman to her farmhouse. Although he tells her about the killings, she makes no attempt to inform the police and lets him sleep in the barn. Later he searches the house for money. At night, he takes an ax and kills the other members of the household, confronts the elderly woman with a demand for money, and then kills her. He goes to a cafe in the town, which is full of police hunting for him. After a drink, he approaches the police and confesses.

Even from this synopsis it should be clear how far Yvon travels from the apparent stability of his everyday life at the start to his violent aloneness at the end. Characters who at first seem to play important roles—the boys who pass the counterfeit bill, the photo store owner, Lucien, and Elise—disappear abruptly from the film, one after another. Lucien, whose role promises to offer a twisted reflection of Yvon's, is more heard of than seen: his last action, the attempted jailbreak, is conveyed only through the offscreen sounds of a siren and shouting voices.

After Yvon's release the action becomes even more fragmented. As his obsession takes control, there are fewer and fewer clues to the other characters and their roles. At first it seems possible that the elderly woman is Yvon's mother, and then that she may be taking pity on him by seeing him as a son she never had; but Bresson gives no facts beyond her actions and her impassive face to support any such conjecture. (In Tolstoy, she is a stranger who feels compassion for her killer, thus touching off the chain reaction of goodness.) Some of the other family

members appear on screen for hardly any longer a time living than dead; one, a paralyzed child, is never identified, and even after two viewings I don't know whether Yvon kills her. All that remains certain in the final scenes is Yvon's obsession.

Superficially, Yvon recalls the protagonist of another film based on a classic novella—Volker Schlöndorff's adaptation of Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*. There too a man's anger over an injustice escalates into an obsession that can lead only to death. But Kohlhaas's demands always retain some link with reason, while the injustice against Yvon taps unsuspected resources of violence that take on a life of their own. Yvon has more in common with the science fiction or horror film hero-victim who becomes transformed by contact with alien powers—such as the infected astronaut in *The Creeping Unknown* or the aged and reborn Bowman in *2001*. For Bresson, however, these powers come not from outside but from within human nature.

If the beginning of the film recalls Marx, the ending seems closer to Freud. But Bresson gives no circumstantial details to account for Yvon's repressed violence. Instead, he implies that the drive to overcome the limits of one's "normal" behavior exists in everyone, and toward the end of the film he demonstrates this in himself, by challenging his own limits as a film-maker.

While Bresson has always exercised great care in the composition of scenes and in the use of sound, he has invariably avoided visual or aural effects for their own sake. Any beauty or emotion in his work seems to arise from objects or events that are filmed straightforwardly. Consider one of his most haunting sequences, the passing of the *bateau mouche* in *Four Nights*. While its impact is heightened by the context, it is filmed without any of Bresson's usual compositional and temporal ellipses: he lets the sights and sounds of the tourist boat, with its colored lights and Afro-Brazilian band, speak for themselves.

In the final sequences of *L'Argent* Bresson breaks with his usual austerity. The first signs of the break appear after Yvon enters the elderly woman's house and talks with her in the kitchen. As in others of his films,

Bresson in *L'Argent* frequently lingers on doors and doorways, as if calling attention to the minor steps with which people may enter on or depart from a major course of action. In the early parts of the film, little depth is visible through any open doorway, and a character who passes through either disappears rapidly or reappears in a different scene. But when the elderly woman leaves the kitchen to check on her father, Bresson holds his camera on the open door until she passes through another doorway in the back-ground. From now on, doorways become deep holes punched in space. When Yvon enters the house from the vegetable garden, the doorway left open behind him reveals distant sunlit trees and blue sky. When he squats beside an open gate, the background is filled with a sky-reflecting river. Bresson brings the same uncharacteristic sense of depth to an interlude that recalls the idyllic brevity of the *bateau mouche* in *Four Nights*: as Yvon helps the woman hang out the wash to dry, they pin it on the line *between* themselves and the camera, and a slight forward dolly further stresses the perspective. In the final scene, after the police have led Yvon out of the cafe, both the camera and the crowd of bystanders in the foreground continue to stare back inside the open doorway, as if waiting to see what other terrible force may emerge through the breached wall of their familiar world.

In the climactic killings Bresson goes even further beyond his usual style. Extreme ellipsis helps to give the sequence an extraordinary visual beauty: a hurricane lamp and an ax move through the shadowy house; pajama-clad figures leave their bedrooms and then lie dead. When Yvon finally confronts the elderly woman in her bed and violence becomes visible, Bresson uses light and framing to impose beauty even on that—Yvon's hands gripping the ax as he asks the elderly woman "Where is the money?"; her bedside lamp smashed as he swings the ax and blood spatters on the wall behind; the ax arcing through darkness (like Kubrick's moon shuttle dancing through space) after Yvon hurls it toward the river.

If the killings arouse horror amid their beauty, it is largely because Bresson breaks another of his rules and allows emotion to



L'ARGENT

be expressed. Admittedly it comes not from a human but from an animal, for which there is some precedent in *Balthazar*: the donkey flares its eyes and in other ways behaves more expressively than any human character. But even Maria Casarès in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, which was made before Bresson could cast his films with unknowns, never displayed as much emotion as the farmhouse dog that befriended Yvon. Once Yvon begins to strike, the dog runs howling along corridors and up and down stairs in an anguished to and fro between killer and victims. As Bresson adds the mutation of his own style to the other signs of disorientation—the falling away of characters, the fragmentation of events, the mystery of who's who at the farmhouse—he charges the end of the film with extraordinary power.

It is easy to interpret *L'Argent* in religious terms, with Yvon's emergent violence standing for the original sin from which he cannot, without divine help, escape. Further elaboration is possible: that prison is a metaphor for earthly life, with suicide as the ultimate jailbreak. But the film also speaks to viewers who do not share Bresson's religious viewpoint. To someone like myself who believes that the value of Marxism and Freudian psychology lies in spotlighting defects rather than in putting them right, the assurance and economy with which *L'Argent* passes through and beyond their realms are understandably impressive; but even those who disagree with that belief could find the film an exhilarating challenge. Bresson draws the viewer into a world that reflects the one

we live in but develops with increasing speed from complexity to a terrible simplicity.

L'Argent's swift movement and underlying tension (What will Yvon do next?) establish a kinship with popular commercial movies—as I hinted earlier with references to science fiction and horror. While critics disagree about the relative value of “art” films and popular movies (some still follow the traditional course of preferring the former, while others opt for the vigor or semiotic richness of the latter), nearly all assume that there is some basic distinction between the two. *L'Argent* calls this into question. Bresson is an “art” film maker par excellence, seeking the greatest possible control over the images and sounds that reach the public in his name. At the same time, he has followed many of the major trends of commercial movie making—such as extensive location filming, the abandonment of black and white for color, and the free adaptation of literary sources. His choice of nonprofessional actors and his refusal to let them act has less in common with serious dramatic practice than with the casting of movie stars, who are valued for the consistent way they look and sound. Bresson even makes effective use of the popular film's urge to trendiness, since *L'Argent* begins with a close-up of a typical computer-age device—an automatic teller machine. As the machine's panel snaps shut, resembling the hatch of a spacecraft, it foreshadows both Yvon's isolation and his journey into darkness.

Bresson is noted—rightly—for parsimony and restraint, qualities rarely found in popular movies. Yet his sparse selection of images and sounds is drawn from a wide repertoire of film-making resources, and their combinations build up a complexity that may not be apparent at any given moment. It is this implicit richness of Bresson's films that embraces elements of the more familiar screen view of the world. And it is because viewers can sense this familiarity that Bresson at his best—as in *L'Argent*—can share with them the vivid, alien experience of his own eyes and ears.

—WILLIAM JOHNSON

